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ABSTRACT

A rationale is presented for a new direction in educational historiography which reevaluates the treatment of the working class as active creators of history. Presently the impact of the working class on the public school history curriculum is not fully assessed or explained in light of other social and economic circumstances in the twentieth century. This neglect of working class history deprives a majority of students of an area of knowledge which carries the possibilities of explaining the past and making recommendations for future actions. Generally such knowledge of the working class is kept alive through the spoken word and music but is not recognized as legitimate knowledge for public school teaching. The result is ideological hegemony which is under control of the dominant culture and is unimpeded by a critical examination of its purpose. Educational historians need to continually examine the historical process of legitimizing or delegitimizing knowledge and especially develop participatory studies of working class history and culture. (Author/DE)

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THE TREATMENT OF THE WORKING CLASS IN AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: CONTINUING THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS FOR REVISIONIST HISTORY

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"History is an X-Rated film."

- New York high school student in interview with Jonathan Kozol

"Oppressors are the ones who act upon men to indoctrinate them and adjust them to a reality which must remain untouched."

- Paulo Freire

"Somebody built the pyramids. Somebody's going to build something. Pyramids, Empire State Building - these things just don't happen. There's hard work behind it. I would like to see a building, say, the Empire State. I would like to see on one side of it a foot-wide strip from top to bottom with the name of every bricklayer, the name of every electrician, with all the names."

- Mike Lefevre in Studs Terkel's WORKING

The metaphor of history as an X-rated film (at least for most people in this society) is a particularly appropriate piece of black humor to describe a situation that educational historiography has almost wholly neglected - or exacerbated. Some members of the working class are clearly aware that this X-rating applies to them, since in interviews with workers, we are, at times, asked a telling question that generally goes something like this: "If we have been around so long, why dosen't anyone know anything about us?" Perhaps the issue of working class consciousness and sovereignty will assume greater significance at some point in the future, yet today's reality is far removed from tomorrow's dreams. Why is this so? In attempting to answer this question, we will develop some theoretical assumptions about the substance and structure of American educational historiography vis-a-vis its treatment of the working class. We will then suggest some ways in which educational historiography can become a means of opening the past for all people rather than, as has too often been the case, serving as an instrument of domination.

It is clear that schools are places in which learning takes place. The questions are: What kind of learning? Of what kind of knowledge? and Who/What is served in what ways? Once we begin to consider these questions and how to search for answers to them, the need for a qualitatively new historiography of the treatment of the working class in American education should become obvious. We must move beyond some of the earlier radical critiques of the functions of education and recognize that schooling is not simply an overt affective socializing agent, but also a powerful sanctioning agent for ideational/ideological norms as well.

These ideological norms are translated into definitive curricular decisions and pervasive attitudinal strictures about what knowledge is worth having.[1] Certainly that same ideological framework that governs activities in schools has had a profound impact on how the working class has been dealt with in the focus and methodologies of educational historiography. In other words, it seems fairly safe to say that the working class has been relatively excluded from consideration in most histories/ historiographical designs except as passive or active agents of their own acquiescence.

We need to ask how this has happened (the dialectical dynamics of knowledge as an instrument in fostering a kind of self-generative acquiescence).[2] We need to examine the process of the stratification of knowledge and find out what functions it serves.[3] And if we ask how it has happened, we also need to ask <u>why</u> it has taken place. The odds are pretty decent that if we root through the "how" long enough, we should get very near to the "why" and vice versa. In any case, the examination of our dominant modes of historiography might bear fruit from such questions. Historical abstractions and reifications have led to impersonal chronicles guarded by a jealous dogma of scholarship which if not conservative in intent, at least has been so in effect. Mills pointed out that, "historical explanations so often become conservative ideologies: (dominant) institutions have taken a long time to evolve accordingly they are not to be tampered with hastily." By tacitly accepting particular methodologies and areas of study as that which is "most" legitimate ("you got that peer group pressure, your jobs on the line now, academic mainstream blues") some educational historians seem to be saying that there isn't sufficient time to examine "peripheral" factors such as the delegitimization of the "folk"

culture[5] and ideas of the working class. Indeed if such factors are dealt with, it is often in the framework of a "consensus" view of the past - not in a framework which is rich with the complexities of conflict and consensus. Certainly an historiography which lends itself to enslaving institutions and canonizing leaders makes a sham of the idea that history should be of the people, by the people and for the people. Unfortunately as Klare (1973) suggests,

> We are systematically separated from our past/our history. We are taught to understand ourselves through the distorting filters of a falsified censored version of history. This denial of opportunity to know as much as possible about the historical bases of our experience (and thereby the possibility of change) is one of the fundamental mechanisms underlying the reproduction of daily life in capitalist society.[6]

And Zinn (1970) says that:

> History has a special ability to reveal the ludicrousness of those beliefs which glue us all to the (dominant) social frame...It also can reinforce that frame with great power and has done so most of the time. Our problem is to turn the power of history...to the job of demystification.[7]

The kind of distorted view of working class history which prevalent methodologies engender does more than simply relegate significant actions/developments to secondary status or supplemental roles. Unwitting neglect of the working class by educational historians certainly skews the totality of history we write and study and the everyday actions-in-the-world of everyone whose history is so deformed. When the "living" past of a large segment of society is effectively negated by not being accorded the necessary formal legitimacy which is bestowed by particular instruments of education in the service of the dominant culture, people from this segment are

virtually deprived of an area of study and separated from a knowledge which carries the possibilities of explaining the present and making recommendations for future action.

In order to critically dissect all of this, we suggest an historiography that looks at the totality of the curriculum - and at instruments of education other than formal schooling. Such an historiography would necessarily have to ask epistemological questions of a critical nature in order to explore the blank holes of unexamined assumptions about the legitimacy of this or that knowledge. If this happens, we expect that there will be a new branch for a growing revisionist school of educational historiography. The point is - its there - this institutionally submerged working class history. People have struggled, do struggle, but rarely, if ever, is their stody told - especially via the accepted channels for the mass distribution of "knowledge." Generally such "knowledge" has been kept alive through the spoken word and through music. So this is one place we must go if our historiography is to adequately deal with the collective pasts of the majority of our people.

We desperately needed the revisionist historiography of the Springs, Katz's, Karlers et al - the history of the institutional domination of education in a corporate state. But we also need to know of the struggles of the working class against this domination ond of their further struggle to pass along and keep alive their presumably "illegitimate" history. And if many educational historians are not to continue narrowly defining their craft, then they must look at the domination of and by more kinds of education than the specifically "in-school" variety. Without doing this, it becomes even more difficult to make sense of the legitimization of

particular kinds of knowledge and the mechanisms of domination by which the modes of folk knowledge can become inundated and lost. Can/Should we glibly separate music in school from that heard to and from school? The social problems discussed in social sceince from the social problems seen on television? Not unless we want to sacrifice understanding the concept of ideational domination in order to preserve some parochial boundaries which only serve to limit our perspectives and our behavior quo historiography.

There is, however, ample room for beginning such exploration within the school per se. As schools continue to delimit the range and scope of social science issues, there are likely to be many "taboo" areas found in public school curricula.[8] Sallach (1974) reports that "...controversial or deviant perspectives are omitted from consideration by teachers and texts...children's perspectives are "sugar-coated" through the books to which they are exposed...those episodes that redound most to our national glory receive emphasis; and the picture of the past is deficient in cracks and crevices."[9] This problem goes beyond maladroitness in curricular design and instruction. Something very powerful is taking place here, and it most certainly is having a significant effect on the critical awareness of the students. "Teachers, as well as texts," Sallach contends, "insulate children from political conflict and deviant values or traditions."[10] The argument is that we are fogged in by our view of society as one of consensus. And while it would be hard to pin a malice-aforethought rap on a teacher for the annihilation of parts of working class culture and history, it is clear that the teacher can affectively stifle the possibility of a students "biography" from ever rising to the surface or being accepted as valid knowledge.

Surely this is an area which educational historiography ought to be concerned with if we are to continue and expand critical revisionist history. Obviously, we need to develop methods in our historiography to look at the historical process of the legitimization of particular knowledge. Indeed we must begin to look at educational historiography to see if/how/why it has been used to legitimize particular types of knowledge and ways of knowing.

Cognitive socialization, then, is a complex process which is inextricably tied up in (yet extends well beyond) the dynamics of formal schooling; it is bound up in the totality of the dynamics of formal schooling; is indeed bound up in the totality of the social construction of reality within any socio-economic system. This overall process is what Sallach describes as ideological hegemony[11] and what Marx was describing when he said that:

> The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas... the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that in consequence the ideas of those who lack the means (institutional apparatus) of mental production, are, in general, subject to it...Insofar as they (the ruling class) rule as a class, it is self-evident that they rule as producers of ideas and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their area.[12]

This regulation of ideas - which by the way needn't be an all or nothing kind of totalitarian regulation - can be effected by that which is learned and that which is not learned - that which Franco Ferrarotti calls the sins of omission.[13]

Coming back to specifics of the treatment of the working class in our educational historiography what we find is a kind of benign neglect. Perhaps this was much more

true in the 1950's and 60's than is the case today (as could possibly be argued if one compares Will Scoggins' earlier work Labor in Learning[14] with Irving Sloan's recent study, The American Labor Movement in Modern History and Government Textbooks).[15] If so, is this not also a place where a critical historiography could do much to develop the means of examining why/how knowledge that may be considered legitimate in 1975 was not to considered in 1945? And if the curriculum did deal with the working class - but only within the confines of the "great man" perspective (i.e., those members of that class who got out of the mills to become part of the bourgeoisie; or those who became leaders of the labor movement such as John L. Lewis or Walter Reuther). Why not examine these assumptions as well? As Scoggins stated, we heard little or nothing (sins of omission) of the collective action and mass pressures and movements which enabled the "great man" to become "great."[16] It must be obvious that this kind of information which constantly omits such a critical aspect of our history is going to teach a particular kind of lesson: to whit, the masses of people who are not "named" in the history or government books have had very little effect on shaping present society, indeed have been led along by those men of extraordinary courage and perception, the geniuses of social action, if you will. This is not to denigrate the extraordinary work of many persons in our history, or more specifically the Lewis' or Murray's and Hillman's and Powderly's - but it is to suggest that much more was going on besides individual saviors uplifting a great inert mass. Yet just such a lesson has been learned over and over what this does, we argue, is to not-so-subtly make people feel that they are of little import in the great social process (if they indeed manage to see that society is a process). If this happens then what follows is less of confidence

in one's own ability to effect change within society as a whole or even within one's union local, not to mention what happens to one's unconscious[17] and conscious being. Given all this, we cannot afford to bypass a critical examination of the curriculum quo dominating knowledge in revisionist historiography.

Why is it so rare when we find a student from Homestead who has learned about the Homestead Strike or discussed it in school? Why is it that few students from Aliquippa have read about or explored the exciting and important history of the Big Steel Strikes of 1937. The story of the UAW organizing efforts and the saga of the Flint sit-down strike and the Battle of Bulls Run seems to have (1) made little impression on students from Flint or (2) it has somehow bypassed them. Why indeed? Is it natural for people not to care about their own "extended" biographies? Or is it due to the unrelatedness and objectivity of a history which has no bearing on the self as actor/as subject in history? Quite possibly we need to look at ourselves as educational historians/sociologists who have not been getting below the surface of such questions (or haven't even bothered to ask) but have accepted explanations which themselves need to be explained. Are we unwitting apologists for the existing order? If we negate the knowledge, the folk culture, the past of the working class, isn't this, in effect, stabilizing the present order? Whether we argue to disargue that this action is desirable, the questions raised ought to be examined and be the focus of future research. Or are many educational historians still believers in the Immaculate Perception; that is, ideas are shaped out of nowhere - a value-free historiography with "choice" parameters extending to infinity.[18]

What results all too often from an uncritical acceptance of legitimized modes of research/study is a kind of semi-conscious stripping away of the culture and roots of a particular class/group of people in this society. As it happens, this class, the working class, if considered as a contiguous whole, is by almost any definition,[19] the largest class in our society. Clearly, an educational process which uses knowledge as a control mechanism is at work here. And it leads to what Freire calls the submersion into the culture of silence/structure of domination.[20]

Collins (1971), argues that such a structure of domination has been/is used by the dominant elite or status group to inculcate the particular status culture of the elite. In other words education should impart a particular set of values, language, styles of dress, manners and foster that knowledge/learning which it deems worth knowing, i.e., that which serves to support the dominant elite's domination.[21] According to Collins, the dominant elite uses "education to select persons who have been socialized into the dominant status culture for entrants into their own managerial ranks...(and to socialize) lower-level employees into an attitude of respect for the dominant culture and the elite which carries it.[22]

Is this to say then that the use of education as a domination and control mechanism is somehow conspiratorial or is the product of a conscious effort to break down the working class or underclass culture and self-awareness? (Though this needs exploring especially with regard to the working class of the late 19th and early 20th centuries). Not likely! Rather, it is primarily the result of the continual motion of the well-oiled machinery of the dominant culture unimpeded by a critical examination of its purpose. All of which leads to the kind of desperately absurd situation that a

friend of ours found himself in while teaching history in Huntington, West Virginia. Mike, a former coal miner, was attempting to develop a working class history of Appalachia as part of his history courses and to bring about dialogue with the students about their everyday life and how that related to their history and culture. When the social sciences department chairperson heard about this, he asked Mike to desist. Mike persisted. Again, it was suggested - this time more strongly - that he concentrate on the text (which Mike found had almost no relevance to the past and present culture of the students). Mike persisted in his development of a "new" history - a history about, by, and for the sons and daughters of miners and chemical workers and farmers-subsistence. Finally, he was called to a meeting of the department head, the school principal and an assistant superintendent of the district schools. They told him they didn't want him developing his own courses on West Virginia history - that this was up to curriculum committees to work out and that he would be terminated if he continued this kind of teaching. He mentioned that he and the students were learning about their backgrounds, history and culture together and that for the first time there was a genuine enthusiasm and interest among most of the students. "After all," he said, "if we don't teach history to learn about ourselves and our society, to learn about future actions, what is it for?" The principal answered, quite matter-of-factly, "We don't know why we teach history, Mike, we just do. That's no concern of ours why its there. Its in the curriculum, its to be done the way you were told to do it, and that's all any of us need to know." Mike's now working as a mine safety inspector. Typical? Perhaps. But can we agree that similar albeit more subtle reinforcing of "legitimate" knowledge goes on every day - and not just in West Virginia.

Naturally all of us are completely opposed to that sort of "our's is not to reason why..." mentality. However, we should examine John McDermott's argument[23] which suggests that even those within the universities who believe they are acting as progressive and liberating forces often are acting as missioniaries from the dominant culture, with not dissimilar results: The pacification of the hearts and minds of the working class "natives" and the diminishing of any thought/action which might lead to fundamental change in the present social order.

Given all this one might agree with Roland Paulston that the instruments of formal education - the public schools and the kind of knowledge considered legitimate therein - are likely to be instruments of liberation or change since they are in the final analysis, part of the dominating apparatus of the state and the dominant class. Indeed, Paulston quite persuasively argues that, ultimately, only nonformal educational institutions which can define working class history and culture as legitimate such as labor colleges or folk schools, can be consistent liberating forces over any period of time. That is schools will only act as a force for the genuine interests of the working class when they are by and of the working class.[24] Quite possibly this is true. But in any case, this particular thesis should stimulate educational historians to do some comparative studies in just such matters.

We might also look to the critical sociology of education[25] for some direction if educational historiography is to reevaluate some present practices and develop significant understandings of the working class-as-active-subjects-in-history. And, if the working class is found to be objects acquiescing in their domination, let educational historiography explore the uses of knowledge for ideological hegemony.

We ought to be developing an historiography which would challenge us to explore the uses of history in the development of self ala Erikson and Coles.

We also argue for a continual examination of historical process of legitimizing or delegitimizing knowledge be made and that participatory studies of working class history and culture be constantly encouraged and used, so that the working class can both create and learn about their own biographies at the same time.

In a recent United Mine Workers Journal, Jerry Johnson, a Harlan County miner, said that what was needed was -

> ...to get a newspaper going in Harlan County for working people. Like do some investigation on this black water they're pouring in our streams from the topples. We'll show people the source of it, tell them how its killing our streams and our fish. Or we'll look at some of these strip mine operators that get permits to mine on an 80 degree slope when the law says 27 degrees is the limit. Who's giving them the permits? I'd like to find out and make sure everybody knows about it - but the Harlan Enterprise - it just tells the operator's side of the story.
>
> I'd say the only way to build is to start teaching the kids when they're young. My little one saw me putting on my bank cap before the strike was over - she didn't know I was wearing it to march down in Harlan - and she started saying, Daddy's a scab. Daddy's a scab." She knew what was going on.
>
> But when she goes to school and the teacher makes her take off this "Vote UMWA" pin she's wearing. And she starts getting all X's (unsatisfactory). Well, then she went to another school and gets all S's (satisfactory). There's only one answer: we need to get organized and get new people in the school board.[26]

This is a beginning to understanding and making one's own history. The opportunity is there for historians to develop a wide-range of perspectives on the treatment of

the working class in American education - Seize it!

We must free the people, including curselves, who are cognitively incarcerated behind the walls of "legitimate" knowledge, under the roof of ideological hegemony.

FOOTNOTES

1. (Note we said "having" as in possessing.) See Young, p. 32, on the property components of the stratification of knowledge.

2. By this we mean an acquiescence that works something like yogurt or sourdough, to strain the metaphor just slightly.

3. See Young, p. 36. "If knowledge is highly stratified there will be a clear distinction between what is to count as knowledge, and what is not, on the basis of which processes of selection and exclusion for curricula will take place. It would follow that this type of curricular organization, presupposes and serves to legitimate a rigid hierarchy between teacher and taught, for if not, some access to control by the pupils would be implied, and thus the process of exclusion and selection would become open for modification and change."
Some would argue that one need not be overly concerned about the public school's shortcoming in this area because many colleges provide instruction in labor history and working class historiography. This argument overlooks the insignificant number of people involved in such a claim. For example, how many high school students go on to college? How many students enroll in labor history courses? Indeed, the number in the set is very small.

4. Mills, p. 155.

5. Paulston, p. 4.

6. Klare, p. 83.

7. Zinn, p. 43.

8. See Young, p. 34. "As soon as possible all knowledge should become specialized and with minimum explicit emphasis on the relations between the subjects specialized in and between the specialist teachers involved....Further, that as we assume some patterns of social relations associated with any curriculum,...changes will be resisted in so far as they are perceived to undermine the values relative power and privileges of the dominant groups involved."

9. Sallach, p. 43.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Marx, pp. 78-79.

13. Ferrarotti, p. 403.

14. Scoggins, p. 90.

15. Sloan, The American Labor Movement in Modern History and Government Textbooks.

16. Scoggins, p. 90.

17. For excellent discussions of the effects of knowledge and the unconscious, see Perwin (1974), Sleeper (1973), Beck (1972).

18. Young, p. 39, says that, "perhaps it is through the disvaluing of social action and the elevation of the value placed on "knowledge for its own sake," through the separation of knowledge from action, well symbolized by the values implicit in such distinctions as "pure and applied"....that knowledge of social alternatives in our educational system is both restricted and, when available, is perceived as alternatives in theory."

19. Except by the definition of those remarkable individuals who argue that there is no working class in American society.

20. We agree with Freire's description of education as an either-or process. It is either liberating or domesticating - though obviously never 100% either way. It is just to say that education is either more liberating or it is more domesticating. Perhaps the more quantitatively inclined could be urged to develop a study whereby a coefficient of liberation or domestication of a particular group/class could be deduced within any given formal education curriculum/institution!

21. Collins, pp. 1010-11.

22. Ibid.

23. McDermott, also see Ken Megill and Paulo Freire, pp. 39, 46-47.

24. Paulston, pp. ix-xi.

25. See Young (1971) articles contained therein - list authors - also Sleeper (1973), Shapiro (1974), Salamini (1973).

26. UMW Journal, September 1-5, 1974.

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